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From One Place to Another

On the Work of Reto Boller

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Reference to a tradition or practice, and related forms of action, or to a method and its concepts, is fruitful when it goes hand in hand with a re-interpretation of the contents, strategies and patterns of thought involved. Because such re-interpretations are rarely radical, they demand an open-minded approach and an attentive eye for shifts, as opposed to breaks. The work of Reto Boller, in my opinion, belongs to the more complex category of shifts. His art draws upon paradigmatic thinking only at a secondary level, putting behind it the stark polarity of modernism versus postmodernism or sculpture versus painting.

Reto Boller's approach emerges clearly when one describes the perceptual experiences involved in both his two-dimensional and his three-dimensional works. Indeed, the framework of discussion can be broadened right from the start, for it is possible to begin at a point beyond the actual spatial presence of the works, beyond their visual positivity (that is to say, the characteristic of the works as they appear in the field of vision of the spectator). The boundaries of this other area are, of course, staked out by the titles which, in conventional terms, rank lowest in the hierarchy of components. In this particular case they actually bear witness to a distinct negativity, quite simply because they do not exist. What we find instead is the apparently technical description: "adhesive, acrylic, aluminum", "resin on wood", "wood, adhesive tape, acrylic", "resin, adhesive, glass", "cotton, acrylic medium", "oil on cotton" or, baroquely exuberant by comparison, "polyester rope in PVC tubing, affixed to ceiling structure". Most of the terms are repeated several times, some in varying constellations. Revealed in this way, the materials lose any claim to significance in their own right and are seen instead as factors within a specific configuration, i.e. in the work and as the work. In this way, Reto Boller counteracts the label "non-traditional" materials (adhesive, for example) and the idolatry of a material aesthetics by emphasizing the different respective handling that ensures the specificity of each work. In other words, these terms, taken literally - with all the misunderstandings that entails in terms of material aesthetics - not only do not represent the work semantically, but actually prove utterly inadequate as a means of specifically describing the works and their nuanced distinctiveness, and even increase the discrepancy between point of departure (the material) and destination (the work). Such a situation is aggravated when one calls to mind a sequence of works that might resemble each other on a semantic level, but are strikingly different in phenomenal terms, as objects observed and as bodies in space.

Tempting as it may be to dismiss this as secondary, let us recall that the undergrowth also helps us to gain an understanding of the forest. Such an approach is justified because Reto Boller makes it the heart of the matter to reverse what is obvious and what is hidden from superficial gaze, to reverse surface and depth. He also overcomes the contrast between center and periphery, for most of his works refer quite literally to the edge, either by reflecting, serializing or adapting it in the inner surfaces, or by

emphasizing it, using color and form to accentuate an otherwise unnoticed area. He also shifts inner forms to the edge so that they appear to be cropped, thereby insinuating their imaginary continuation into the ambient space, or uses complex and dense all-over structures to explode, from within, the spectator's visual fixation on the points of reference provided by the picture panel. Apart from the literal border created by the edge, which both dissolves and confirms such processes, the literal limit of the plane is also destroyed - and of course the impact of one such form of dissolution cannot be clinically distinguished from the other. In this respect, the literal plane is abandoned by means of mirroring or (semi-)transparent surfaces that reflect the space diffusely, reacting to the lighting conditions of the ambient setting and thus remaining perceptually mutable. Moreover, the vibrant luminosity of the palette subordinates the pure planarity of the work to the color space. Reto Boller also achieves similar effects by using colors of similar or barely differing tonality, confusing our senses so that we are unable to determine the spatial relationship between different pictorial segments in a way that would allow us to establish the identity of the plane.

This list of processes is by no means exhaustive. Behind all this talk of the dissolution of the constitutive aspects of the picture, such as edge or plane, we also find a practice that not only subscribes to issues inherent within the concept of art itself, but applies specific material processes in such a way that the mutual dependence of supposedly clear and absolute opposites is left open to interpretation. Such a practice also redefines identity, proving it to be a category that is not independent of space and time, but the effect of spatio-temporal configurations. Time becomes a potent factor wherever a work addresses the threshold of perception in ways that make it visible in the strictest sense only from different vantage points and from certain distances. This means, for instance, that a work can be seen as such only for the duration of the time that the spectator traverses the space in front of it. Spectator and work thus become bound up within a temporal process. By way of example, there is a work created in 1995 with protrusions under whitened cotton which, depending on where the spectator is standing, appears as a pure plane, while the relief of the work is imperceptible.

A similar approach is also applied to the pictorially constitutive carrier. Sometimes it is visible, sometimes cast under bulges of material, sometimes rounded, sometimes standing out in geometrical clarity, sometimes subordinated to the irregular course of some covering matter. Reto Boller also undermines the conventions of left/right and top/bottom, eroding them by the serialization of inner forms and symmetries (or quasi-symmetries), to name but two of the more obvious processes. It should be noted, however, that there is no pre-established logic that might secure the spatial orientation of the individual works as such. It cannot be denied that this openness and fundamental differentiation also has to do with the fact that the works are not rooted in what gestalt psychologists would term fronto-parallelity, i.e. in the usual mode of perception by which the gaze invariably falls vertically on the object observed, and grasps the spatial orientation according to familiar patterns. In creating his works, Reto Boller turns the carrier from the vertical to the horizontal, thereby breaking the fronto-parallel code and allowing himself to approach the plane from all directions. The way these works are subsequently hung is, for the most part, not only a logical consequence of certain guidelines inherent within the works themselves, but is itself an act of interpretation or

at least a decision that is not entirely preordained. For some time now, even the tacit understanding regarding back and front has been violated in works that move away from the wall and push their way quite literally into the surrounding space. In the works under discussion here, there is a certain continuity that suspends the contrast between the painterly and the sculptural or between two-dimensional and three-dimensional works. This continuity is expressed negatively in the undermining of all the pictorially constitutive aspects, and in the quest not to create an a priori and arbitrary hierarchy of apparently primary and secondary aspects of a work. It is expressed positively in the desire to lend the work greater reality, even if it is a contradictory reality, in that the works develop discontinuities and continuities between space and time, which necessarily emerge in different ways in the individual experience of each spectator. What does this mean in real terms?

Light, the movement of the spectator, spatial structure - all these are aspects that are not extrinsic, but intrinsic to the works, as we have seen. Nevertheless, one might ask sceptically whether this means that, in spite of its mutability, there is an ideal point in time at which the spectator might be able to summarize all perceptions in a total and temporally gained presence? Does it mean that a point of perception can be reached at which the various phenomenological phases might be absorbed in a moment of undifferentiated, pure presence, if only the spectator were sensitive enough to condense different perceptions towards a single point of higher experience - the presence of the self? If the different colors and forms in Reto Boller's works were merely variations on the same story of pictorial constitution and its discursive field, the answer might be affirmative. However, it is rather more complex than that. Moreover, the works evoke a world of objects, however potential and fragmentary, that is activated within the individual mind through experience and memory. Is that not a hill? Is that not a grid, a window, a meadow, a canal system, waves, a colonnade or flowing water? Is that not a mat, a stain, a cloud? Strictly speaking, these works do not, of course, represent objects from the world of our experience. What they do instead is convey an illusion of the presence of such objects. It is precisely this irruption (as opposed to reproduction) of a mental image or an imaginary dimension in the smooth and theoretically infinite continuity of phenomenological processes that make Reto Boller's works so forcefully compelling, for all their openness. It is only at this point that the phenomenological processes articulated in the combination of light, space, perception and color, form, material, texture, mass, etc. actually begin to take on a certain perspective. Instead of being generally dependent on the perceptual willingness of the (self-)conscious observer who becomes involved in the phenomenological processes, the works evoke mental images that originate in the singular experience of the individual. These images are neither representations nor substitutes for the mental images of the subject. In other words, they are not pre-established in the mind, but linger openly at the interface between real space and imagined space. This is also symptomatically evident in the positioning of the works whose allusions remain mutable, depending on whether the works use higher or lower spatial segments and depending on their juxtaposition with other works. It is a question of similarity with crucial differences already prepared to some extent in the (non-)titles.

The work of Reto Boller, if it only instrumentalized real space, would merely be a

recapitulation of minimal art. (The work of Robert Morris in the late 60s springs to mind.) Given that it also stimulates the spectator's powers of imagination, it would appear to be linked with a certain art historical tradition, which it seems to extend by its analysis of a prevailing mood and sense of time shaped by a media-generated and all too often non-committal flood of images with the resultant leveling of time to a directionless continuum; a mood informed by the reification of experience to the point that it risks trivializing individuals and cultures in a simulated universality. The works of Reto Boller accept the conditions of visual culture, as it were, allowing the spectator at the same time to relate to what is real and thus call to mind a non-fetishist reality that renews itself in the transition from one place to another.